



**LECTURES ON  
CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY 1**

*Organised by:*

Resource, Research and Communication Unit,  
Council of Churches of Malaysia

**CHRISTIAN APPROACH  
TO DIALOGUE WITH  
PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS**

## **Lectures On Contemporary Christianity 1**

### **Christian Approach to Dialogue with People of Other Faiths**

**Talks delivered by**

**Rev. Dr. Vinay Samuel**

**Rev. Chris Sugden**

**at the  
Trinity Methodist Church,  
Petaling Jaya**

**on  
3 July 1986**

**Resource, Research and Communication Unit,  
Council of Churches of Malaysia**

The Resource, Research and Communication Unit of the Council of Churches of Malaysia aims to develop resources which will contribute to the process of evolving studied Christian responses to the social, political and economic issues of the nation. The views expressed in this booklet, however, are those of the speakers/authors and do not necessarily reflect the position or stand of the Unit or any member body of the Council of Churches of Malaysia.

Copyright © 1987 Council of Churches of Malaysia.

Published by  
Resource, Research and Communication Unit,  
Council of Churches of Malaysia,  
26 Jalan University,  
46200 Petaling Jaya,  
Malaysia.

## CONTENTS

Foreward	i	
Introduction	ii	Rev. George Vergis
Chapter I	1	HISTORICAL REVIEW OF CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER FAITHS
	1	New Testament
		a. Jesus
		b. Paul
	2	Christendom
		a. The Stream of Conquest
		b. The Stream of Modernisation
		c. The Stream of Philosophical Superiority
Chapter II	4	THEOLOGICAL ISSUES IN CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER FAITHS
	4	Truth
	4	Grace
	5	Salvation
	6	Further Biblical Material
Chapter III	8	A NEW APPROACH IN CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER FAITHS
	8	Presuppositions for Dialogue
	9	Agenda for Dialogue
	11	The Purpose of Dialogue
Discussion	12	
Selected Bibliography	21	



## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multi-religious, multi-racial and multi-cultural as well as a developing country. The official religion of our country is Islam and it has all the backing of the government financially, politically, socially and in all other aspects. The other religions are recognised in the constitution and as such we have the freedom to practice and propagate them.

Among the non-Malays or non-Muslims in this country we have different reactions to each other. The Hindus tell us, "Hands off Christians! Don't disturb our people." The government brings in Islamic values in all spheres of life slowly and steadily. Islamic civilisation is a compulsory subject in tertiary level education and there is a group very seriously trying to bring about an Islamic state. Doubts have been cast as to whether parents have any authority over the religious choice of their children who are still minors. We are all encouraged to master our national language which is Bahasa Malaysia. All the non-Malays have made a great effort in studying the language and our children now speak fluently Bahasa Malaysia at home and especially amongst themselves. While we are encouraged to learn Bahasa Malaysia we are also told that when we worship in the national language we are not allowed to use certain words.

There are many other things. I need not go into the details. Keeping in the background all the difficulties and problems, we formed the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS). The major religion of the country is not in this council. It is a council of non-Muslim religions. When one religion especially the main religion is out of the council, I am of the view that the dialogue cannot be complete. We, that is the non-Muslims, come together for dialogue and discussion in mutual understanding and respect but we are so preoccupied with the common problems we face that we have not had the time to sit down with the right attitude and peace of mind to start and continue a proper dialogue. Last month itself MCCBCHS had to prepare and send not less than six memoranda to the government authorities and that leaves us with very little time for any dialogue.

Even among the Christians there are some who have reservations about having dialogue with other religions. They are eager, it may appear, to preserve the purity of Christianity and so if one mingles with the others and if one goes into dialogue one may get into dangerous straits. I know there have been views expressed that dialogue will not bring any benefit. But as Christ said, we must be prepared to die so that we may have life, life in full. A wheat germ if it does not fall onto the ground and die does not bring forth fruit. So if we really want to bring forth fruit in this country, we must be prepared to get into dialogue, to get "dirty" and to die so that new life may emerge.

Rev. George Vergis  
President  
Council of Churches of Malaysia.

## CHAPTER I

### HISTORICAL REVIEW OF CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER FAITHS

I would like to begin with the theme of Christian relationships with other faiths and against that background zero in on the understanding of dialogue as it is currently used. To do that we need to look at Christian relations with other faiths and at our own history as Christians in the world relating to other faiths.

#### 1. THE NEW TESTAMENT

I will begin first with the New Testament. Was the early church aware of other religions or that it was in a pluralistic context? Early Christians were aware that they were in a context of religious pluralism. They were aware that there were Gentiles defined not only racially as non-Jews but also as those who held other religious commitments. There were people who had other faiths and Gentiles were seen in that particular light.

##### a. Jesus

Jesus himself was aware that the general attitude of the Jew was to define himself and his identity over and against others. Constantly under pressure the Jew developed an identity which made him define himself in the negative, for example "I am not like those Gentile dogs." Their identity was defined far more over against others than by itself.

Jesus was deeply aware of this. He sought to redefine people by what God does in their midst, who God is, what he had done for them, how he has called and disciplined them. The focus was on what God had done. God was not merely limited to the Jews. God could work and give faith to a Roman centurion whose faith according to Jesus proved to be better than any Israelite's. Jesus was aware of the religious plurality of people from other backgrounds and faiths.

##### b. Paul

Paul was also aware that the Christian faith had to relate to other faiths. For example the Roman rulers were not only politically different but religiously different as well, and there were the Greeks in Corinth and Athens. Paul's attitude was certainly not one of confronting but of understanding the other faiths. He sought to use the literature of other faiths. He befriended people of other faiths. Rather than confronting and conquering them, he had an understanding that in this community of people we lift Jesus up through our witness and by our life; an understanding that if rulers and people in authority were of other faiths, one respected them and prayed for them as instruments of God.

Therefore, if the Gospel and the Christian faith were resisted in the New Testament times, it was not because of the style of Christianity but the content. The content was the cause of the stumbling. It was the stone on which other



faiths stumbled. Paul was very clear that the way in which we relate to others should not be offensive or become the cause for rejection. It is against this background that we have to see later developments.

## 2. CHRISTENDOM

### a. The Stream of Conquest

It was not very long before the church became a State church that the church took on the style of the State. It became the conqueror and sought to conquer other religions. Witness was no longer the focus. Christendom with its State power had conquered all the non-Christian religions. This church model with its close alignment with the State developed from the fourth century onwards. Against it the Prophet Muhammed and Islam developed its own theocracy and its own understanding of church-state and religion-state relationship. That stream prevailed during the colonising periods of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Throughout the world, the church and State got so linked. The Catholic Church continued to use its power to colonise and conquer the people of Latin America and even North America. The whole attitude was one of conquest. Even though the missionaries were often not aligned with the State, the state was always behind as an invisible backdrop and backing. The image of the style of the church was that they have come to conquer. This style of conquest is very different from the style of the servant, the New Testament style of one who shares his faith.

### b. The Stream of Modernisation

Aligned with the stream of conquest was the stream of modernisation. Christian faith was linked with modern technology, growth, science and modern life. It was the strong conviction of Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century that with the growth in modernisation and with better education of the so-called natives, their religion would crumble through their inner contradictions. As a result Christian missionaries built schools to give modern education and to teach rational thinking. They assumed that the religion of the native was not rational. They assumed that the only religion that could cope with rational scientific truth was Christian faith. Against the onslaught of rationality the other religions were expected to automatically crumble. Even that did not quite work out the way it was intended.

### c. The Stream of Philosophical Superiority

Thirdly, there was the stream of the philosophical superiority of Christianity. They assumed that Christian faith had been built on sound philosophical reasoning and thinking. It had been worked out systematically and therefore was inherently superior. So if it is presented in a reasonable way to reasonable people,

it will automatically be accepted by them. The unreasonable religions will be swept away. After all they are religions which have lots of inner contradictions. This was the thinking that produced the inward and external conditioning of the Christian churches today. Unfortunately certain parts of the church have internalised this and continue to use these same arguments.

Following the Second World War and the passing away of the colonial era, the emerging and newly independent nations with a desire to build up their own people began to look for a religious foundation. They did not look to Christianity. They found it in their own religious resurgence. In India there was a renewal in Hinduism — not the dynamic reformation which one would have liked to see but nevertheless a resurgence and renewal. They were saying, "We are committed to our nation. We are committed to its integrity and unity and we want the freedom to share our faith." The tables were reversed and Christians had to justify themselves and move away from the conquest attitude. It is sad to see some Christians still maintaining the conquest attitude. A number of others who had distanced themselves found themselves minorities in nations which were resurgent culturally.



## CHAPTER II

### THEOLOGICAL ISSUES IN CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER FAITHS

That is one of the key reasons why Christians facing the issue of relating to other religions must begin with Christianity's own history in relating to other religions. We have to be aware of the history that has made us what we are, that has gone into forming our background, our institutions, and our churches and has conditioned our thinking and our attitudes. We therefore need to look at some of the issues that our history raises before we can go on to biblical material. What then are some of the issues as we face others?

#### 1. TRUTH

A fundamental issue we face with the resurgence of other religions is the issue, "Is there truth in other religions?" Jesus has said, "I am the way, the truth and the life," — the way, the truth and the life. There is the definite article before "truth". Must it mean that there is no truth in the other religions?

The Christian conviction is that all truth comes from God. He is the creator of everything, of persons, of the whole world and of all truth. Therefore any truth that we discover about the world, about life and about humanity is truth from God. There is no other source of truth. We would be pushed into a terrible dualism if things could be ascribed to be good and not have their source in God. The church recognised this. Working from the New Testament understanding of the world as being created through the logos and that logos being present in Christ, the early church fathers understood logos as also being present and working through human reason. The same word logos was used for reason.

The church has developed an understanding and awareness especially in the moral area that people have a sense of what is right that is given from God. This does not mean that there is something in us subjectively that witnesses to truth. It actually claims that there is something in other religions, in people of other faiths that has the seeds of truth. And if the Bible permits us to use this concept of the seed of truth, how do we judge the validity and value of those seeds of truth in other religions?

#### 2. GRACE

The yardstick is how far do they witness to, lead to and open the door to Christ? What, for example is their understanding of man's alienation from God? There may be a sense that man is truly alienated from the source of his being. There may be a sense that our relationship with God must be due to God's

grace, something initiated entirely by God. There may be something of the devotion and love that the believer is to have towards God. Where did these ideas come from? Where did the idea come from that our relationship with God is entirely due to His grace? Working backwards through the Old Testament, Christians have asked the same questions about Abraham. How did Abraham relate to God? Is it entirely through God's grace, entirely through his faith in the gracious activity of God? That way of relating to God on the basis of grace and faith is acceptable to God. That is the way God affirms as we see it in the Old Testament. It was not mediated through the people of God because the people of God did not exist at that time. It was not mediated through Christ, Christ was not present at that time. But the Bible shows that that way of relating to God is affirmed by God.

We must also ask what the seed of truth in other religions says about sin, salvation and God's grace. The issues about the seed of truth is not whether Christ includes everybody or excludes some. The question is what in that religion may be a seed of truth, a witness to him and to which Christ is the fulfilment and can be used as a bridge and pathway to lead others to Christ.

#### 3. SALVATION

Another issue is the issue of salvation. Is there a possibility of salvation in other faiths? The biblical material suggests that Christ is the Lord of all. We cannot separate Christ and his work in creation from his work in redemption because we are told that creation is through Christ and for Christ (1 Cor. 8:6) and as Redeemer, Christ is the Redeemer not of the other world but of this world: the world which God created through him and for him. With his death, Christ acts redemptively. We cannot separate God's activity as creative and providential, totally separate from his redemptive activity.

Therefore if we perceive a seed of truth in the way of relating to God in other religions, the question remains who put it there? Christ has put them there. What is their effect then on being there? Their effect must be to a limited extent a redemptive effect, part of God's purpose of redemption. The effect of it is to bring part of God's redemption into that context. Is that redemption an eternal redemption, a perfect redemption?

To be assured of redemption, one has to personally acknowledge and accept Christ as Lord and Saviour. Then that person is in Christ and in Christ's family, has the security of being a son of God, having as an assurance that God has forgiven his sins. God is with him and he will be part of God's eternal kingdom. Where that presence of Christ is acknowledged and allegiance is given to him, there is redemption. But where the presence of Christ is not consciously acknowledged, there is no clear evidence to suggest that there is redemption



in its full sense. We may speak though of a limited effect of redemption. If somebody is aware of the grace of God, of the value of the ethical teaching of Jesus, of Jesus' high moral claims or the claims of justice in society that God requires, then we can speak of a limited effect of redemption. The person will have no assurance of his/her own salvation. But that limitation is not due to the nature of the work of Christ as though he gives himself only to his people and will not give himself to others. That limitation is due to our response.

The issue of salvation in other faiths then is not due to the nature of the work of Christ but rather the nature of people's response to it. What we are seeking to affirm here which is one of the key issues in relating to other faiths is, "Can we say that other people remaining in their own faiths be saved? How do they experience salvation?" This kind of questioning we believe is wrong because the Bible does not answer questions framed in that way.

Christ works as creator and redeemer at the same time. His work is both creative and redemptive. Therefore, wherever he is at work, he is effecting redemption. He is bringing about a redemptive activity but that redemptive activity is as broad as the summing up of all things in Christ.

In the Bible the restoration of nature to its true status, the groaning of nature, the groaning as it were of this despoiled nature is part of that total redemption that Christ has effected. Redemption is never limited essentially only to the spiritual aspect of individuals. Redemption is the broad term that covers all. It affects all the despoiling, all the disturbance, all the brokenness of human relations, of relations between people and God, between people and nature, among people and nature and God.

If that is the case then God, Jesus Christ as Lord, is at work in each of these situations. Of course there is a specific activity where individuals consciously acknowledge Jesus Christ. They can claim with conviction and confidence that they have experienced redemption personally. But no individual Christian based on the Bible would dare to limit it to himself/herself. One can confidently affirm, "I have experienced redemption. I've seen Jesus. He's come into my life. He's saved me." That is true but to go on and say, "It's limited only to me and the way I do it," is going beyond the scope of the Bible.

#### 4. FURTHER BIBLICAL MATERIAL

We need to go on to the biblical material that supports this kind of understanding. The biblical basis for relating to those outside is there from the very beginning, in the constitution of God's people to whom Abraham was called to be a blessing. He was called to experience blessing as a people and as a family through whom all the other nations will be blessed (Gen. 17). From the very

beginning the destiny and future of Israel, as God's people, was inextricably and inseparably linked with other nations and all the peoples of the world. Often they were judged not only by what they did among themselves but also by what they did not do in relation to the other nations, how they dishonoured God in the midst of other nations, how they continued to be a curse instead of a blessing to other nations. This was the judgment upon them. The same things should hold true for Christian people. If it was true for Israel, it is true for us. We are not defined by the blessings we receive and the truth we have.

Our self-understanding as Christians is dependent on how we relate to other peoples and their faiths, how we are a blessing to them rather than a curse, how we are channels and not barriers of God relating to and blessing them. This is of fundamental importance. We, as a Christian people, can never be on our own. We are defined by what we are in relation to other people. St. Paul says it in Ephesians 2, "The greatest gift we have is that by the cross of Christ, by the blood of Christ, the human divisions in society, Jew and Gentile, are broken down." That is the real basis for relating with freedom to others rather than in hostility and fear. Paul says that what Christ did on the cross directly drags down all those human hostilities.

In our context one of the greatest hostilities that comes between groups is that of religion. The Christian must witness to the fact that his identity does not introduce a barrier of hostility between his community and other communities. Instead it should free him to relate in confidence to others.



## CHAPTER III

### A NEW APPROACH IN CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER FAITHS

What do we mean by dialogue? What are our intentions in relating to other faiths? Is it conversion? Is it sharing the faith? Is it to deepen our own faith? Can we limit our intentions? Some people suggest that our intentions should only be to share and deepen our own faith and to develop a deeper understanding of other religions. We need to be very clear in the examination of our intentions. Why do we want to dialogue and relate to other religions? As a tool to evangelise, to convert? Why?

According to the Bible, our intention should be to share what God has done for us and to lift Christ up as the one who has done this for us, as the one who came into the world to do it for all people. That biblical intention cannot be foregone or given up.

#### 1. PRESUPPOSITIONS FOR DIALOGUE

We must look carefully at our presuppositions in dialogue.

**First**, do we believe that all religions are closed systems? Is Islam a closed religion? Is this what all Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians believe? Have we ever listened to what other people think of us as Methodists, Anglicans, Roman Catholics? Often we are tempted to look at other religions as closed systems which do not change. So all the caricatures of a closed system are attributed to them. No religious system is a closed system. Religions are dynamic systems which can grow. Religions are plural systems with different backgrounds. There is a variety in every religion. Therefore we must be careful about our presuppositions so that we do not carry caricatures with us.

The **second** presupposition is that certain systems are logical and other systems, illogical: others are superstitious whereas ours is truth. Is that really so? We must examine not only our intentions but also our presuppositions about how people experience religion. Do we think that other religions are superficial and static, that they never change nor bring about any change whereas our religion does. These presuppositions must be thoroughly examined.

**Third**, we should be aware that real dialogue can only take place between equals. This means that we must recognise a person from another religion/group as an equal in the sight of God, rather than speak to them supposedly from a position of power, of strength, of perfection. This is where the heart of Christianity is so fundamentally different.

In the Hindu tradition, one can only share with another if one is perfect. That is why one should be a "guru" before one can teach another. A "guru" has achieved a degree of perfection. He/She has worked hard and can now take on disciples and teach them. The Christian faith is exactly the opposite. One does not share because one is perfect or because one has arrived. One shares because one is imperfect and has not arrived. But, Christ has accepted us as we are and made us his children and is working in us, giving us his gifts and blessings, so that we can share. It is that which we share, not our perfection. The temptation for many Christians is to become "gurus", to start from a position of perfection, knowledge and having arrived. Therefore you come and join us. No! The above are important aspects in relating to other religions.

#### 2. AGENDA FOR DIALOGUE

"What are some of the important agenda items for fruitful dialogue?" The focus of dialogue or relating to other religions especially in conversation and sharing of one's faith is not that of swapping truths, one with the other, "I've this truth, see how bright it is. Now you share your truth and we'll see how bright it is." And we match the truth to see which truth is more true.

The focus should be, "Which religion brings change in our historical context and situation?" How does our religious experience transform a world of racism, oppression, economic and social injustice, rich and poor, developed and under-developed? In a context of violence and cheapness of life, which religious experience has the vitality and strength to bring about transformation?

Ultimately, the questions of the poor and the marginalised are fundamental in our dialogue. In any dialogue, the question should be, "What do the poor think of my religion? Where do the poor come in?" It is not a matter of the pedantic scholar or the Christian philosophy professor or the theologian from the theological seminary sitting and sharing together (that is a good way of sharing and that has its usefulness but whether it will be helpful in transforming society is another question).

Dialogue means to listen to those who are the worst victims of all these situations, the poor, the marginalised, the women, the slum dwellers. That is the stuff of dialogue. That is the focus of dialogue which will enable us to move forward from merely swapping our experience of truth to something concrete and historical which will challenge us to face the reality of our own present day historical context. It is religion at the service of people. It is that focus which is of fundamental importance.

Bishop Michael Nazir Ali of Raiwind in Pakistan, the author of the book, *Islam, A Christian Perspective* (Paternoster, 1985) speaks of his experience of



sharing the person of Jesus in dialogue in an Islamic context, that is Jesus as a prophet, Jesus and his ethical teachings. I would like to quote what he says,

No mere metaphysical subtleties are going to win the Muslim to Christ. Until he is confronted by the person of Christ as found in the Gospels and in the life of the church, he will not find it possible to acknowledge Christ as Lord. The character of Christ as Andre points out is unmeasurably superior to any other human character and the excellence of his teachings, the power of his miracles, the commitment of his obedience unto death and his glorious resurrection all conspire together to convince men [and women] as to who he really is.

Bishop Michael Nazir Ali puts the focus on Jesus as a prophet. If we look at Jesus in dialogue with other religions in his time, we see that he had dialogue not with the religious leaders but with the outcasts, the marginalised and women. He does not discuss philosophical questions with the pharisees and the sadducees because he said those were not the right questions. The questions that he discussed were the questions that were asked him by the poor and the marginalised. They came to him with their questions. They came to him asking for healing. They came to him asking about bread. It is those questions that Jesus affirmed. For example, the Gentile woman who came to him and said that even the dogs eat the crumbs from the master's table. Why were the women marginalised? Why were the Samaritans despised? It was those questions which they brought forth that Jesus responded to. And he used their questions to challenge the religious leaders. He challenged the Pharisees on the law and said, "You have neglected justice, mercy and faith."

Bishop Nazir Ali directs us to focus on Jesus and the ethical aspect of his teachings, to take the questions of the poor and the marginalised. Those are the right questions, the questions of justice, the questions of whether women are to be excluded from religious teachings just because the teaching of the Jews at that time regarded it as better for the Bible to be burnt than for a woman to read it. Yet Jesus taught Mary the scriptures and told Martha that it was quite proper for Mary to receive the teaching from the scriptures. In ethics and action for the transformation of society, for the benefit of those who have been excluded and made poor, we can present Jesus and enter into discussion, learning and common action with those among whom we might be able to perceive in the light of Christ the seeds of truth.

The ethical teachings of Jesus therefore become the very basis for dialogue, certainly with religions which take history seriously like Islam. Its perception of God is not of one who is uninterested in history, who is up there leaving the world it has created on its own. Islam knows God as one who constantly sends his prophets to move history in the direction that he intends. Therefore Jesus as the prophet and his ethical teachings concerning God's action and particular

movement of history can become a very fruitful area of dialogue as it was in the early years between Islamic and Christian scholars. In the Middle East, there is a whole range of literature and tradition going back hundreds of years of very fruitful and effective dialogue and sharing. This is our legacy but one which we never really look at. We think of it as something new which has been thrust upon us. The western church never looked at it because it forgot dialogue for hundreds of years in its desire to conquer all the other religions.

We have to get back to the tradition of the eastern churches. They have lived in an Islamic context for many years and have dialogued and shared and learned and loved and grown as well as suffered. It is that which is important for us to return to, to share and to experience.

### 3. THE PURPOSE OF DIALOGUE

Moving on from the agenda we find ourselves confronted with the purpose of dialogue. The biblical vision is that every nation will bring its gifts which will be taken up to heaven (see Rev. 21:24). That is a beautiful vision speaking of other nations as religious entities and not merely as socio-political realities. And all this is summed up in Christ.

This vision is not one of separating the sheep and the goats. The sheep and goats are much more within the people of God, not so much outside. The vision really is that all will bring their gifts, lay them at the feet of Jesus, making them a part of the new heavens and the new earth.

If that is the vision, and that is what motivates us, what should be our attitude in relating to other faiths? Our attitude should be one of humility, that the whole thing is not dependent on me, that if I do not do it, it will never be done. Rather we should understand that God can bypass me, that God can use others, that God is not limited to me.

Secondly, we should have an attitude of confidence in God's activity and not rely solely on our human activity alone. God will move history to its completion so that all things will be summed up in Christ.

Thirdly, we should have an attitude of openness in looking for God's activity. Where is God at work? How can I be linked with God at work? Is God at work in another group of people where I do not expect, who may be having another faith? How do I link with them so that in my linkage and sharing this God will be revealed as the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. May His name be praised. Thank you.



## DISCUSSION SESSION

**Comment 1.** You mentioned that salvation is not just through Christ alone; that it can come through other faiths. If that is the case, can you explain to me John 3:18, "He who believes in Him is not condemned. He who does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

**Response 1.** God's salvation for the world is through Christ. What we said was that wherever we see the seeds of truth, they are truth from God and that God in Christ acts redemptively wherever he works. Anything we see that is good is rooted in Christ and is part of Christ's work and not due to any other saviour.

**C2.** Does that mean that salvation is not necessarily through the blood of Jesus Christ, the death of Jesus Christ on the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

**R2.** What do you mean when you use the word salvation? Jesus by his death and resurrection brought redemption. Is this redemption limited only to the spiritual area of life, simply to our hearts and souls and to our conscious acknowledgement of Christ as our personal saviour. That means that if I am born mentally retarded, can I not experience salvation because I do not understand and cannot say verbally, "I receive Jesus. I'm a sinner."

Redemption is broader than my acknowledgement of Christ. At the heart of redemption is the individual's personal acknowledgement of Christ as Saviour and Lord. Redemption is only through his blood, death and resurrection. But you cannot just limit redemption to that. The Bible says, "All things are redeemed and are caught up and reformed and put to God in Christ." So it is not only a redemption of individuals which is only possible through a conscious personal experience and acknowledgement of Christ. But the effects of redemption can be in many different areas.

**C3.** What I mean by redemption is that when you die you go to heaven into eternal life.

**R3.** The eternal life of the individual is only one aspect of redemption.

**C4.** Can you have eternal life without believing and acknowledging that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that he died on the cross for our sins and rose again from the dead except for the people who are mentally retarded?

**R4.** For individuals who are conscious, who have been given the opportunity to hear the gospel there is no other way except through a personal acknowledge-

ment. But that is not the only way. If it is I will be condemning at one go all my Hindu ancestors, some of whom have been very fine people but have not acknowledged Jesus Christ. I would hesitate to go to heaven where I cannot see even one of them. It is difficult to believe that God will punish all of them through no fault of their own. This is a difficult area and one should not make a judgement. Positively we can say, "If an individual has been presented the gospel and has personally experienced it and unless he/she accepts the gospel, he/she will not be saved. But let us not pass judgment."

**C5.** I hope your broad definition for the concept of redemption is not at the expense of the specific understanding of salvation that we have in the New Testament, where salvation is talked in terms of a personal expression of faith in Jesus Christ. Within that broad definition of redemption, a specific understanding in terms of faith in Christ must be defined and spelt out. As much as you are concerned to give a broad definition, I think you must also give a balanced picture.

**R5.** I have said firmly and plainly that we need to hold them in balance but we also have to be fully biblical. We cannot choose only some aspects of the Bible. If we take the whole Bible, redemption is broad as well as narrow. The problem with the Bible is that it is not very logical and that is the problem with all religions. If it is logical it would say it is only broad and not narrow or vice versa, that it has only to do with individuals and has nothing to do with society or nature. Paul says it in a poetic language, "A whole creation — everything!" In fact, he applied the blood of Christ to the division between the Jews and the Gentiles." I may like to tell Paul that the blood of Christ has nothing to do with racial conflict, that it has only to do with the spiritual realm. But he says we have to proclaim so that individuals and communities will personally acknowledge Christ and through him alone in that acknowledgement is redemption. We have to deal with both aspects and we have to emphasize both. The danger is that if we emphasize only one at the expense of the other, we distort the message of Christ. We cannot emphasize the broadness of redemption at the expense of individual commitment to and experience of Christ. But we cannot also limit redemption only to the individual. We have to hold both in proper balance and tension.

**C6.** I beg to differ with you on your theological understanding of salvation. I still take the limited and restricted understanding of salvation, of that particular spiritual dimension which only comes through Jesus and an expression of faith in Christ.

**R6.** There is no question that it only comes through Jesus, that it is only because of his death and resurrection. But I am trying my best to be as faithful as possible to the biblical material.



**C7.** You made a reference to Revelation 21:24 about nations bringing their gifts. What will those gifts be? Will they be cultures? What is the concept of a nation?

**R7.** The text is affirming a vision. It says that heaven will surprise all of us. There will be people, groups and nations whom we never expected to see. And the people whom we expect to be there will not be there. "Lord, Lord, when did I not see you?" This is to enable us to have humility so that we do not decide in this life who is to be there in the next. And that humility is our basis for relating with other religions.

**C8.** There is a theological teaching which says that there is a universal salvation for all nations.

**R8.** I am not a universalist and I am not about to suggest that all will automatically go to heaven. I do not know how in the world will God ever take into heaven those people who have deliberately gone against God and oppressed the poor. We have to take sin very seriously and God's judgment on sin absolutely seriously.

**C9.** Am I to understand that salvation can be through works, not necessarily through grace?

**R9.** That is what I mean by having caricatures of other religions. In the seventh and eighth century there existed a whole Hindu tradition of 'bhakti', throwing oneself on God's grace. Christians would probably be quick to point out that it was due to Christian influence. That is trying to make Christianity the source of every good thing. It is like we in India trying to suggest that all science originated from India. We have to recognise the positive elements in other traditions. There is a Hindu tradition of totally throwing oneself on the mercy of God. In the fifteenth century, an Indian Muslim, an eccentric poet, composed and sang beautiful 'kabit'. His couplets in Sanskrit and Hindi were about "God, I'm nothing. I'm an absolute sinner. How can you ever receive me into your presence? I throw myself on your mercy. Your grace is the only thing that will receive me." Now which God will reject that kind of a cry?

**C10.** What I mean by grace is the blood of Jesus Christ dying on the cross. If salvation can be through other means, if we can just cry, "God, I'm sorry," why then did Jesus Christ die on the cross for our sins?

**R10.** Salvation is only through Christ. There is no question about it. People in the Old Testament were saved because of the blood of Christ. It was pre-figured.

**C11.** Do Hindus believe that Christ died for their sins? Do they ask God for forgiveness because of the blood of Christ? Do they ask Jesus to come into their lives?

**R11.** I am not sure that even all Christians believe in that particular formula. And I am not sure that your formula is inspired by the Holy Spirit in the same way that scripture is. It does not have the same authority.

**C12.** Then can you please explain John 1:12, "All those who believe and receive him will become children of God." How can there be any other way?

**R12.** I fully agree with you that there is no other way. But I cannot insist that my way of explaining and defining it is the only way. I want to be humble enough to say, "Lord, this is what I believe but I am open to correction."

**C13.** We as Christians have been brought up with the wrong understanding of salvation, that is it has been much too individualistic. Of course there is an individual aspect to religion. But when it comes to salvation we are more concerned with salvation for rather than salvation from. Our focus is on Jesus Christ, his blood, his crucifixion and we very conveniently forget the practical lifestyle of Jesus Christ vis-a-vis the realities and problems of present day society. This analysis and understanding is very basic and crucial for dialogue. Jesus Christ forsook the throne and chose to die on the cross. We have lost sight of that. We are caught up with our private and narrow understanding of salvation. We cannot judge whether people of other faiths will be saved or not. Everyone is saved through Jesus Christ. He is the only one who is to judge. The basic aspect of salvation is redemption from self, self being the root cause of all sins. And the solution for that is Jesus Christ himself, his lifestyle, whatever the religion, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.

**R13.** Christ alone will bring full and true liberation to everybody. But in being open, I am not giving up on what I believe to be the answer. We cannot talk about other religions without first having spent time dialoging with people of other faiths. Are our caricatures of the others right? Are we ready to talk and share with them? Let us not throw tracks at them. We react when people do that to us, when they use the law at us. Are the others not made in the image of God also? Do we not affirm their humanity?

**C14.** I speak from a layman's point of view. The basis of our faith is really quite simple; that Jesus is the way to salvation. We are not sure of salvation in the other religions. Since we are convinced that Jesus is the only way, our task as Christians would be to tell the others, "Look, we believe that Jesus is the only way. But we are not saying that as Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus you will not go to heaven." It is not for us to determine that. God is not dependent upon my decision on such things. But we have to tell them the definitive thing



and not make it a mere possibility. That is the bone of contention. How does one compromise on that with other faiths? Would you in your dialogue with other faiths

- i. put Jesus on your agenda of discussion;
- ii. discuss the love of God and love of neighbour;
- iii. attribute your activities to the Spirit of the Lord? Do you see the Spirit moving in Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism? Or would you confine the work of the Spirit to within Christianity as is manifested in the charismatic approach of Christians?

**R14.** First, there is no question but that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. But how am I communicating it to others? Do I do it with arrogance — I am right and you are wrong — or with humility? The importance of communication in communication science is not so much what I want to say but how my listeners are hearing me. Let us be sure that the others do not hear us say that we are the only ones who know the truth and that they are foolish. Jesus communicated what he believed to be true in humility, especially with the poor. And we are not even Jesus. We are sinful, fallible people saved by grace but have not reached perfection either intellectually or spiritually in spite of the fullness of the Spirit we claim to have. We have not reached personal purity and perfection in any field of life to be able to say that with any degree of authority.

Secondly, what is the heart of the ethical teachings of Jesus? Love God and love your neighbour as yourself with the agape kind of love, a love which expects nothing in return, a love which is prepared to die, to give itself up to others expecting nothing from them in return, not even their conversion! Are we prepared to feed someone, die for someone even if they do not become Christians? Are we prepared to let them live with us while they worship their Hindu God and our only recourse is to pray, "Lord, I'm not going to force it on them. I'll trust your Spirit to work in its own way and time." That is love. That is the heart of dialogue, of Christian ethics. It is through this kind of love that the fundamental nature of Christ and the uniqueness of the Christian faith is revealed. There are seeds of this in other people and religions as well. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. But it is still debatable how God, the Holy Spirit is at work in other religions. John Taylor's book, *The Go-Between God* (1972) is probably still the deepest and most important reflection on the subject.

**C15.** When you say that the real premise for dialogue is the ethical teachings of Jesus, I find myself confronted with a problem. As you have pointed out, the seed of love is present in people of other religions. An example that we are all familiar with is Gandhi, even though we rationalise that Gandhi was really a Christian at heart. Given this situation where there is truth in others as well, what is so special about Christ? Or is there something that needs to be special about Christ?

**R15.** Because we understand Christ to work only in an individualistic way, when we say that Christ may be working in other religions, we think that if Christ is present there, that immediately means that the person is saved eternally. Looking at the scriptures we see that Christ worked with groups of people also. His concept of salvation was broad which means that we can see him at work but it does not entail that the individuals concerned have an individual relationship to him. So what is it about Christ's work in the church that is special and different from his work outside?

Just because we say that there are seeds of truth in other religions does not mean that they have everything as well. It does not mean that every individual automatically has a saving relationship with Christ. The fundamental nature of a saving relationship of every individual with Christ is through conscious acknowledgement of Christ. It does not mean that there is salvation just because everyone expresses a little bit of love here and a little bit of good there.

What is the uniqueness of Jesus then if others have love? The uniqueness of Jesus is that all love comes from him. His very person is uniqueness and his uniqueness is not set against somebody else.

**C16.** You defined dialogue on the basis of relationship and you emphasized the importance of humility and identification with the marginalised. However, a number of people who work with the marginalised are arrogant and dominating. They tell them what to do rather than lead through example of lifestyle that will lead others to Christ. It is easier when you are feeding someone to tell him/her that you must believe rather than allow one's lifestyle to affect the person that you want to draw to Christ. I find this a great dilemma because in my area of work it is so easy to tell rather be the person Christ wants me to be.

**R16.** In the gospel we are told that the marginalised came to Jesus with a question about the religious system of their time. Now the religious system they lived in told them, "You are only acceptable to God if you keep all the laws about the Sabbath, if you don't mix with the Gentiles, if you don't mix with women, if you don't have anything to do with certain animals, etc." As a result, shepherds, tailors, people who had to deal with Gentiles in business were told, "God has nothing to do with you. God is not interested in you. God is only interested in the pure, perfect elite. This is God's law and it excludes you." Their question to Jesus was, "Is that right?" And Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is for you." And he ate with them to demonstrate that they were welcome as members of the people of God. In fact, he said, "You're more welcome than those who think they're already members." The whole attitude of Jesus affirmed and restored their dignity.



The trouble with us is that when we relate to people who are marginalised, we are still trapped in that relationship of distortion. We relate from our position of resources and power to their position of dependency. Basic to dialogue is equality especially in relation to such people. First, the fundamental goal is for us to recognise their dignity. Second, there are things we can learn and receive from them and need to learn and receive from them. The gospel is good news to the poor and what it means to the poor people can tell us a lot about them. It depends on our perspective of the situation and our concern for the dignity of the individual. The eventual purpose is not that they continue receiving but that they in their turn become stewards who are also able to share.

Religious systems can be very oppressive of the poor. There is a lot of difference between dialoging with middle and upper middle class professionals and dialoging with the poor. When we dialogue with the poor the oppressive nature of the whole system is revealed. Jesus came to throw out the oppressive religious system by bringing good news of liberation to the poor and oppressed and those who are deprived of their dignity. That is why it is important that we do not snatch away the dignity of the other person in dialogue by claiming all sorts of things for ourselves and distort Christ's message. In the light of this, to work with the poor means to be a servant to them, to wash their feet instead of coming down on them with power.

**C17.** I would like to look at case studies of people involved in dialogue. What are the lessons that we can learn from them? What are the dangers for example of syncretism? How can we as Christians in this country progress in very practical ways in dialogue?

**R17.** First, we normally enter into dialogue with certain presuppositions, for example that all religions are equal paths to God. That is not real dialogue because the stage is already set. There is already a direction and orientation. We should go into dialogue with our convictions, commitments and understanding of the gospel of Jesus, the Lord and Saviour. But we should also go with the openness that our convictions and understanding will be deepened. Only the Holy Spirit in its power can help us balance these two forces, that is to maintain our convictions and at the same time remain open.

Second, dialogue can either lead to deepening or diluting of faith, in the sense one can get thoroughly confused. That will happen if our convictions are not based on strong foundations. We who are used to pat formulas have our faith built on flimsy foundations. On top of that we look at the others as caricatures, "Oh, they don't have a real God. They're not very generous or loving." But if we care to find out more about them, we may be surprised to discover that they maybe more Christian and more open than we. And the encounter may shatter our belief because we have built it on false foundations. But we must not despair. We must go back to the Lord, "Lord, show us where we have gone wrong. Help us to understand you. What lesson are you teaching us."

However there can be a deepening if our convictions are strong and solidly founded. We can then praise God. "How wonderful and glorious you are, Lord. How multicoloured you are. What a marvellous way you work. We box you in and tell you this is how we want you to work but you get out and work in a different way to gently and kindly teach us." No doubt we have to be careful but more important than that is our convictions and commitments and above all is the need to open the love of God in our hearts because love can only point to Christ. Where there is openness and love, there is growth and there is Christ becoming visible.

Just to quote an example. In the Rotary Club, it is a regular practice for a member to invite the other members to a meal occasionally. It was my turn and I invited the members, wealthy young people, to my house instead of a restaurant. I had warned them, "It's not going to be easy. There's no proper sanitation and the place is smelly." I was living in a typical slum area even though my house was quite decent. I do not come from that background but I have opted to live there. Came that day, all these cars were lined up outside my place. It was quite a sight. They had a terrible time finding the place. In spite of all that they came and ate and survived the place. At the end of it, one of them told me, "Now I begin to understand the meaning of commitment." After a while he continued, "It means that you must be prepared to do this even though you are not from this background."

To take another example: some students in a course on missions went on exposure to a village about five miles north of Bangalore. The predominantly Hindu occupants of the village work in the quarries. The students wanted to discover what was the frontier between the gospel of Jesus Christ and that particular group of people. They wanted to do a people profile to find out what makes them tick. The students talked to the quarry workers during their breaks at work. They discovered that the workers were migrants from another state. They came over 25 years ago to work in the quarries.

They discovered two very interesting things. Once they asked the quarry workers, "What do you do when your children are sick?" The children also worked at knocking stones with hammers to break the granite down to small road chippings and were suffering from very terrible skin sores due to the flying chips. They answered, "Oh, we consult the spirits who live in the trees around us and we consult the soothsayer who tells us from which direction the spirit that is attacking our children is coming and then we sacrifice a goat to that spirit to ward it off." When the students came back that night they reflected, "How do we relate Christ to those spirits?" They referred to the scriptures and discovered that Jesus is Lord of the principalities of power of which the spirits are but an expression. They learned more about the Lordship of Christ by going back to the scriptures through encounter with those illiterate, simple Hindu villagers.



After sometime, they found that insecurity was a major problem for these people. The students asked them, "What can we do together to help you cope with and overcome your insecurity?" And they replied, "You could help us bid for the contract to run this quarry." Again the students went back and studied the Bible. They discovered that God wants people to have somewhere secure to live, for after all, did not God give his people land! So the students agreed to work with them. They drew up a contract, consulted some lawyers, submitted the contract to the government. And they said, "We want to pray with you also." The students went back to the Bible and found that in Acts 14 when Paul and Barnabas were in Lystra, the people had garlanded and worshipped them as gods. But Paul and Barnabas said, "No, stand up. We're just men like you." And then Paul continued, "You pray to Zeus for rain, crops and food. But the God who gave you these things we declare to you in Jesus Christ." (Acts 14: 14-18). In other words, these people pray to Zeus but they were heard by the God of Jesus Christ because it is said, "the God who gives you these good things I declare to you." With that scriptural understanding the students prayed because they saw it as a spiritual battle also.

The result was the owner of the quarry doubled their wages. The reaction of the quarry workers was, "This is the first time we've experienced God on the side of us poor suffering people. Everything we've experienced so far has pushed us down. On top of that the spirits attack us. This God you talk of in Jesus Christ must be somewhat different. So we will turn to him." The people turned to God because they experienced the concern of the students. The students as Christians had shown interest in them. They wanted to find out more about them and they found a concrete area for dialogue because they responded to the questions of the poor, "Is it God's will that we'll always stay poor like this? What sort of God is that?" By their involvement, the Christians demonstrated the nature of the God of Jesus Christ.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abdullah Omar Nasseef, "Muslim Christian Dialogue: Muslim Approach", *Current Dialogue*, World Council of Churches, Geneva, December 1986, No. 11.
- Ariarajah, Wesley, *The Bible and People of other Faiths*, World Council of Churches, Geneva and WSCF Asia/Pacific Region, Hong Kong, 1985.
- Chih, Andrew, C.D.D., *Chinese Humanism: A Religion Beyond Religion*, Fu Jen Catholic University Press, Taipei, 1981.
- Guillaume, A., *The Life of Muhammad*, A translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Raul Allah, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1982.
- Kitagawa, Joseph M., "Some Reflections on Chinese Religion", *Inter-Religio Newsletter*, Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Japan, Spring 1986, No. 9.
- Molla, Claude F., "Islamic Fundamentalism," *One World*, World Council of Churches, Geneva, December 1986, No. 121.
- Renze, Ruan and Xiao, Zhitian, "Two Addresses to an Inter-Religio Delegation of Scholars of Religion", *Inter Religio Newsletter*, Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Japan, Spring 1986, No. 9.
- Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi, *The Islamic Way of Life*, edited and translated by Khurshid Ahmad and Khurram Murad, The Islamic Foundation, United Kingdom, 1986.
- "Muslims and Christians in Society: Towards Goodwill, Consultation and Working Together in Southeast Asia", Memorandum of Muslim-Christian Dialogue, Hong Kong, World Council of Churches, Geneva, January 1975.



Rev. Dr. Vinay Samuel got his doctorate from the Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in the States. He holds an M. Litt. from Cambridge and is the General Secretary of Partnership in Mission-Asia, a fellowship of missiologist in Asia. He is a pastor of a church in a slum in Bangalore and Secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of India Commission on Relief. He is also an adviser to the World Council of Churches' Commission on Evangelism.

Rev. Chris Sudgen, M. Phil., Oxford, is the Registrar of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. For six years he was colleague to Rev. Vinay Samuel in India in pastoral ministry, theological education by extension and development education. He is now pursuing his studies in Ph.D.



RESOURCE, RESEARCH AND COMMUNICATION UNIT  
COUNCIL OF CHURCHES OF MALAYSIA